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ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented on the advantages and disadvantages of preschool education. Some critics argue that all children should have such intervention as is now provided for the disabled, arguing that such stimulation is a preventive measure against learning disability, delinquency, and other ills. Others disagree. It is contended that early childhood education (ECE) research in one of several areas is sufficient to question (1) early stimulation generally and (2) day care out of the home. It is also pointed out that the skillful intervention in behalf of even one child in the home can stimulate the entire family. It is concluded that, wherever practicable, intervention should be carried on in the home or in an environment identified as closely as possible with the home. (CK)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION--A Position Paper*

Raymond S. Moore

There is much talk these days, stimulated partly by accident and partly by design, that a young child cannot normally be fulfilled and optimally developed unless he goes to a good preschool. It is commonly inferred that a parent who does not give his child such an experience is depriving him. And in many cases of disability or handicap such an inference may be reasonable. Yet for most children correlated research findings overwhelmingly point in the opposite direction: For highest and best cognitive, affective and physiological development we should do all we can to develop a wholesome home and keep him there--a place where the child can grow in an undisturbed environment, sharing the freedom and chores of the home with one or two adults (preferably his parents) in a warm, close, consistent and continuous relationship.

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For more than 150 years increasing attention has been given to the development of the young child. Important advanced steps have been made in early childhood education, particularly in the last ten years. This attention and progress may be seen in im-

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*Full documentation for the positions taken here may be found in the basic manuscript published in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, Vol. 118, No. 167, October 16, 1972, pages E8726 - E8741,

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portant efforts by planners in California, New York, Washington, Maryland, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and in fact in nearly every state and the federal government. Furthermore, the American concern is being reflected around the world from Japan and Taiwan to Germany, and from Australia to Britain and Canada. It is because this movement has developed into a massive trend toward earlier schooling, that we reexamine its rationale.

Defining Terms. Early childhood education (ECE) is commonly viewed as a general term equated with the years before kindergarten and primary school. On the basis of a recent research review we conclude that perhaps it should include birth through age seven.* We see ECE programs as including but not limited to early schooling (ES) and to day care. We believe that all children should be provided training or education from birth, but that it should be far more affectively than cognitively oriented, and wherever possible should be in the hands of the parents until age 7 or 8. Equally important, we believe that optimal pre-natal preparation should be made--in terms of the mother's nutrition, physical and emotional environment, etc.

We assume with California ECE Task Force and the New York Board of Regents that clinical and other therapeutic intervention in school or clinic or other environment may often be indicated, that where practicable all children should be screened to identify learning disabilities and that parents should be involved at every step. We also believe that this view implies a much larger, though possibly less academic, responsibility for educators than many of us apparently yet envision. But we do not find replicated research evidence for generalized early schooling programs down to ages three and four as suggested by California, New York and others.

Reviewing Research. Replicated research evidence assembled from reputable researchers (e.g. neurophysiologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, psychologists, sociologists, and other educational and medical personnel) leads us to conclude that efforts should not be made to induce or to legislate early childhood education out of the home and into schools for all young children in the range of ages three or four to five as currently proposed, for example, in California and New York and as under serious consideration elsewhere. To take such action is to accommodate the separation of the family and to reduce family responsibility, instead of to educate parents to retain their primary privilege and opportunity in an era when complete parenthood is urgently needed, and to be supportive of the school when the child is ready to enroll.

Bear in mind that despite California's ECE reference to academic development[1] and New York's optimistic ECE use of "formal education,"[2] we assume that such early schooling proposals envision the most advanced of educational programs, with optimal freedom for children. Yet research overwhelmingly points to the home, not to the school, as the desirable environment for most young children and to the undesirability of placing children in programs of cognitive emphasis before age seven or eight.

Early Schooling for All? Some critics believe that such research analyses will preclude necessary early stimulation in school and will deprive children of sound preschool education. Some insist that all children should have such intervention as is now provided for the disabled, arguing that such stimulation is a preventive measure against learning disability, delinquency, and other ills. Dale Meers says that this is like prescribing methodone for all because it works for the addicted.[3] Some tend to assume that any other course would be educationally, psychologically and economically unsound. But in all of

this they make one basic assumption which research indicates is untrue, namely that the rapid development of the typical young child's intellect suggests the need for stimulation apart from and in addition to a wholesome home life.

Again, we agree that children should be carefully screened for physical, psychological, emotional and other abnormalities, and where disability is noted there should be intervention as soon as practicable. Research stresses the rapid early growth of the child's intellect, but it does not support the so-called stimulation of children in general. This is much like rushing a thoroughbred colt onto the track as soon as he can run, in order to make greater use of his heritage of speed, or planning sexual experience for a newly pubescent daughter, as some parents do, in order to increase her later potential. Or yet, it is like forcing open a rosebud, beautiful in its potential and perfect in its immaturity, but not yet ready to fully bloom: no matter how delicately you open it, you end up with a damaged rose.

We agree with Heffernan, that we may be "warping children to satisfy adult demands."[4] And we suggest with Piaget that "the problem of learning is not to be confused with that of spontaneous development even though spontaneous development always comprises learning."[5] Phillip reports that Piaget calls the speeding up of the development of the child's brain the "American question." Piaget's answer to this question, according to Phillip, is that "it probably can but probably should not be speeded up."[6]

We believe that available, replicated research evidence in any one of several ECE-related areas is sufficient to question (1) early stimulation generally for children who are not handicapped or deprived and (2) day care out of the home if not really necessary. These areas include, for example, neurophysiology, maternal deprivation, cognitive and affective development and comparative school entrance age. Key examples of research evidence are presented in our basic paper.* And evidence is mounting every day.

Neurophysiologically the young child is not completely ready for regular tasks which require abstract or cause-to-effect thinking until he is seven or eight or older. Leading cognitive psychologists suggest the age span of seven to eleven as the time when a child becomes able to reason abstractly, as required, for example, in reading. Opthalmologists and optometrists suggest that the young child is not ready for the teaching of reading visually-perceptively until he is at least seven years old, and for some until age nine. This does not mean that he may not learn to read on his own. In fact some children may have to be restrained from too much reading (or television) in order to avoid permanent eye damage. Similar findings have been made in auditory and in intersensory perception. Neurophysiologists have found that brain structure and function--physiological and psychological growth--are very closely related.

Maternal attachment/deprivation studies clearly demonstrate the cognitive and affective value of maintaining a warm, consistent and continuing home environment vis-a vis the value of a school program, however well-planned, and dangers from maternal deprivation may exist until eight years of age. Even though the empathetic, informed mother does not formally teach, her child will likely be physiologically more mature and coordinated, more adaptable, sociable and more advanced in language skills.

A kind of synergic factor appears to enter here. Note that when the research in these areas is correlated there is a remarkable similarity of findings, and they become much more powerful when brought together than when moving in each of their areas separately. As is true with most scientific analyses, we may on occasion be faulted by the specialist. But, if we divest ourselves of special interests, look at the larger picture systematically, and grasp the larger developmental concepts implied, we will be less likely to nit-pick at the details. Thus only will we develop responsible conclusions and make sound progress.

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From another area of experimentation, comparative studies of early and late school entrants overwhelmingly indicate that later entrants generally excell in achievement, adjustment, leadership in general, social-emotional development and in motivation. These studies have been made at high, middle and low socioeconomic levels, and measurements have been taken at virtually all grade levels with substantially the same results. Halliwell, in his "Reviewing of Reviews on School Entrance Age and School Success," concludes that

> The analysis of the reviews on entrance age and school success in the elementary school indicates conclusively that despite the plethora of prominent individuals and organizations which maintain that the research on early entrance supports the position that early admission results in no adverse effects, early entrance to first grade does result in lower achievement throughout the grades when comparisons of achievement with control groups of later entrants of similar abilities are made.
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> . . . In view of the facts, that at any grade level the early entrant is approximately seven months behind his control in achievement, that despite an extra year of schooling the early entrant is only three months superior in achievement to the regular entrant at a particular age, and that other approaches to acceleration have resulted in superior achievement for younger pupils both in terms of age and grade, the conclusion of the present reviewer is that the advantages of postponing early entrance to first grade programs as they are presently conducted are very real.[7]

If this is true, then one wonders why we suggest schooling at ever earlier ages, instead of using our resources to strengthen the home.

Some say that women want their freedom too much to be concerned or that parents will not respond to their children's developmental needs. Intuitively this certainly appears to be so. But research does not agree. A number of studies indicate that parents, when carefully informed of what is best for their children and how to meet these needs in uncomplicated ways(as parents, not teachers) are quick to respond. In other words, there is evidence that adults who will support the challenge of the environment--polluted streams and air--will also respond to the concerns of human ecology, especially their own children.

It is certainly more convenient to move along with the massive trend to early schooling and other programs (1) which would provide maternal freedom at the expense of the child and (2) which would threaten the integrity of the home. We have repeatedly asked for facts to support this movement, but apparently replicated research does not support this course. Several points should be specifically noted:

1. Some of the leading scholars in the nation advise us that they believe that research evidence in favor of early schooling does not exist, certainly not in any substantial amount.

2. Some of them are deeply concerned at the indifference of many educational planners to the findings of research. Says Schaefer:

> . . . Although much of this [ECE] research data has been generated during the last decade, earlier studies of intellectual development have motivated the current volume of research. Unfortunately, interpretations of the significance of this data, although they have guided the course of research, have as yet had minimal impact on educational planning. . . .[8]

Rohwer provides an excellent example of research's contrast with existing early schooling trends and practices in terms of ages three to six:

> Young children find concept-learning and tasks that require combination and manipulation of concepts to be extraordinarily demanding. Research studies have shown that reading and arithmetic require conceptual abilities that many youngsters do not achieve with ease until they are close to 9 years.[9]

Such discrepancy between research and practice is hard to understand. Certainly our society would not be advanced technologically (planes, cars, computers, etc.) if our planners had not given implicit attention to research. Should we do any less for our children?

3. A number of leading ECE authorities are modifying or reversing their positions, or have reported that they have been forced to deny their research hypotheses favoring general early intervention outside the home.

4. Sheldon White, who has recently completed a comprehensive study of federal ECE spending, is concerned that from the way it is going, the early schooling movement "will work itself into so much trouble within six years or so that it will wipe out the gains special education has made and possibly ruin the future of early childhood education."[10]

Parents and Home Projects. A number of researchers, scholars and planners have been experimenting successfully with ECE growth programs centered in the home. These include Susan Gray, Ira Gordon, Merle Karnes, Phyllis Levenstein, David Weikart, and others. According to Gray[11] and Schaefer,[12] they find this more cost effective than intervention through schools. They are encouraged by the thinking and experiments of such researchers and scholars as Mary Ainsworth, Burton Blatt, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Frank Garfunkel, Robert Hess, Samuel Kirk, Dale Meers, Glen Nimnicht, William Rohwer, Mildred Smith, Burton White and Sheldon White and Ed Ziegler. To some, such as Blatt, Garfunkel, Kirk, Meers, Nimnicht and Schaefer, this represents an important modification or even reversal of earlier thinking.

The implications of parent-home education are many and substantial. Where necessary the skillful intervention in behalf of even one child in the home can work as a yeast throughout the entire family, benefiting remaining children. If instead of abrogating their responsibility the parents can be helped to see their children's developmental needs and to meet them constructively, if they can gradually involve their children from infancy in the best possible attitudes, values, chores and other responsibilities in the home, they will likely pass on to the school youngsters who are more stable, optimistic, self-respecting, better disciplined and highly motivated. Where possible this should not only be integrative instead of devisive from the family point of view and provide the child the warm unbroken environment he needs from birth through age six or seven, but should also gain parental under-

standing and support for the school.

We reemphasize that we recognize special educational needs for the handicapped, broadly speaking, and we are aware of the need for child care facilities where parents are disabled or forced to work. Even in such cases, however, research indicates that wherever practicable the therapy and care should be carried on in the home or in an environment identified as closely as possible with the home.

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[1]California State Task Force Report. "Report of the Task Force on Early Childhood Education," Wilson Riles, State Superintendent of Public Instruction and The State Board of Education, November 26, 1971, p. 1.

[2]New York State Regents, Prekindergarten Education, a position paper, The State Education Department, Albany, New York, December, 1967, p. 5.

[3]Meers, Dale. Personal Communication, May 17, 1972.

[4]Heffernan, Helen. "A Vital Curriculum for Today's Young Child," Early Childhood Education Rediscovered, Edited by Joe L. Frost, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1968, pp. 496, 497.

[5]Piaget, Jean. In Foreword, Almy, Millie, with Edward Chittendon and Paula Miller, Young Children's Thinking, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1966, iv.

[6]Phillip, John L. The Origins of Intellect, Theory, by H. W. Freeman & Co., San Francisco, 1969, pp. 132, 149.

[7]Halliwell, Joseph W. "Reviewing the Reviews on Entrance Age and School Success," Readings in Educational Psychology, Edited by Victor H. Noll and Rachel P. Noll, 2nd Ed., Macmillan, New York, 1968, p. 65.

[8]Schaefer, Earl S. "Toward a Revolution in Education: A Perspective from Child Development Research," The National Elementary Principal, Vol. LI., No. 1, September, 1971, p. 18.

[9]Rohwer, William D., Jr. Speech to the National Leadership Training Institutes in Early Childhood Education and Special Education, Today's Child, May, 1972, p. 1.

[10]White, Sheldon H. Quoted by Raymond S. Moore, "The Race to the Schoolhouse," Harper's Magazine, July, 1972, p. 62.

[11]Gray, Susan W. "The Child's First Teacher," Childhood Education, December, 1971, 48:3, 127-129.

[12]Schaefer, Earl S. Personal Communication, July 18, 1972.